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Boulder is Commuter Program's 'Choice'

Initiative says city can help prove capabilities to the rest of nation

by Mary Butler

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A brown haze greeted Jeffra Rockwell on her arrival in Denver — an appropriate sight, considering that she came here this week to promote better air quality.

"Three out of four Denver-Boulder commuters drive to work alone," Rockwell said. "That's a statistic the federal government hopes to change with the help of area employers," she said.

Last year, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Transportation introduced the Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative, which Rockwell now works for and promotes around the nation. The voluntary program rewards businesses for making it easy for workers to carpool, ride bicycles, walk or take buses and trains to work.

The desired result is cleaner air and reduced global warming through fewer automobile emissions.

But to make the program work, Rockwell said, the government wants to make "Commuter Choice" a household name — like the Good Housekeeping seal of approval — and make it an employer benefit as talked-about as 401(k) retirement plans.

Boulder, she said, can help.

The city is considered an "example employer" that can prove the program's capabilities to other parts of the nation.

"Boulder is known nationally for its

unique transportation programs," Rockwell said. "People take the bus here, they walk."

Jan Ward, Boulder's downtown transportation coordinator, was recently tapped to answer questions about the city's transit and alternate-modes programs for a Commuter Choice "phone forum," a monthly conference call for businesses to learn more about implementing commuter aids.

"People call us all the time," Ward said. "I've been dealing with Missoula, Mont., today. Fort Collins came down yesterday. ...We're a resource for people. The EPA is providing the overall structure and vision."

Initiative promoters chose the Denver-Boulder area as one of three areas in the nation to focus their efforts on, based on initial response to the year-old program. The other two areas are San Francisco and Philadelphia.

Forty-six of the 300 companies nationwide already participating in the program are in Colorado, with 15 of the 46 in Boulder.

The U.S. 36 Transportation Mobility Organization, whose main mission is to help area companies reduce the number of cars on the road, joined Commuter Choice six months ago.

"For us, it's a no-brainer. We do these things anyway," said Debra Baskett, U.S. 36 TMO executive director.

Since joining, TMO has used resources provided by the initiative to help other companies get started and take stock of the

employee benefits they already offer.

Companies qualify for the program if they offer several ways to make using alternative modes easier. For example, offering bike lockers, employee showers, preferred parking for carpoolers or flexible work schedules all qualify.

Every Commuter Choice employer must offer to subsidize a bus or vanpool pass, pay employees not to drive to work or offer a telecommuting program that reduces monthly commute trips by at least 6 percent.

Other requirements include making a commitment that at least 14 percent of employees do not drive alone to work and agreeing to annually report to the EPA about the company's commuter programs.

Commuter Choice cites a study by Xylo, a Bellevue, Wash.-based consulting firm specializing in employee retention, showing that people are eight times more likely to use public transit if their employer pays for it.

Commuter Choice, Baskett said, "gives companies one more reason to pay attention to alternative modes and support their use. It gives them recognition, too, which is always a benefit."

For more information, visit the program's Web site at www.commuterchoice.gov.

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